

In Offense of Classical Music

I recently had to sit through a performance of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (it was the conductor's farewell concert). At first it was simply boring, but as I listened more carefully, it grew increasingly painful, until it became excruciatingly so. I literally began tearing my hair out and trying to cut my skin with my nails (there were large red marks when the performance was finally over). The pianist, I was certain, kept flubbing the notes and getting the timing off. But few around me seemed to agree. "Well, he certainly plays it differently from Gould," was the most they could say.

The audience, like that of private libraries and the FOX News Channel, was decidedly old. I don't recall seeing *anyone* who looked younger than thirty. And, aside from thoughts of this whole orchestras-playing-classical-music thing dying out, it made me wonder: what's so great about classical music?

Ask the old folks there and they'll tell you that nothing really compares. Listen to the stuff on the radio today and it's all simply repetitive melodies with stupid lyrics. And the thing is, they're right: the stuff on the radio does suck for the most part. But that's not really a fair comparison.

When I listen to good modern music, it takes my heart in its hands and plays with it as it pleases — makes me soar, makes me sad, excited, and mad. But when I listen to classical music, at most it simply occupies my brain for a while. Is this simply a flaw in my perception or has music really improved?

I think it's possible to argue that music is actually getting better. As humans, we clearly share a number of genetically-encoded similarities, perhaps with some variation. For example, we almost all have two eyes, although in different shapes, sizes, and colors. Imagine that we are similarly endowed with some shared sense of musical appreciation (or, put another way, emotional susceptibility). We all fall for the same musical things, again with some variation.

If this is the case (and while I can't really prove it, it seems at least plausible to me that it is), then there would indeed be objective standards for measuring music: better music would be more appreciated by the "average person" or the majority of people or some such. And if there are objective standards for measuring music, then music can get better.

And, if we again imagine that what's appreciated in music isn't simply random, that it involves certain traits (which seems pretty clear, although again hard to prove), then not only can music get better, but it probably *will*. Musicians will listen to old music, the majority of them will enjoy the good songs of the past, and they'll try to build upon and improve that good material, following its patterns, creating even better music. And the next generation will do the same, from a further along starting point.

Does this prove that the latest Aimee Mann album (*The Forgotten Arm*) is the best work of music yet to be created by humans? Of course not. But it does mean it's at least *possible*, that I'm not completely crazy for thinking so.

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